

What Pearl Harbor Day was like for one Citizen

What was Pearl Harbor Day like for Nebraska Citizens?

Here is what it was like for one, Forrest Gaskill, the son of Mrs Ethel Gaskill and the late Ray Gaskill who was stationed on the U.S.S. Oklahoma in Pearl Harbor at the time of the sneak attack.

The following, written by Navy Man Gaskill when he was 21 years old, and sent to his mother by a friend who brought it to the states and mailed it from Texas months after the war started, is as thrilling as any story of the Day of Infamy.

Here is his story, written while the events were fresh in the mind of Mr. Gaskill:

"On the morning of December 7th, 1941, I was entering the chaplain's office on the main deck. At that time, 0800, I heard the word passed over the loud speakers for all hands to man their battle stations! Of course everyone started for their designated parts of the ship. The sincerity of it all wasn't fully realized until the ship had been hit by a torpedo on the port side.

"As I descended to the third deck — my battle station Radio 2, I found it was secured in condition of readiness Zed. At that time a torpedo exploded to port, and the second and third at close intervals.

"Abandon ship had been sounded as the ship was listing about 9 degrees. As I rushed up to the "S" division compartment a crowd of men were halted at both doors. The word had just been given them that the ship had already settled to the bottom — and there should be no cause for alarm. We managed to open one of the gas mask lockers in the meantime — had just fixed one on my waist and at that very minute two or three more loud explosions were heard and the ship gave an upward movement and keeled over from starboard to port, throwing all the men against the port bulkhead, pinning some under lockers and bunks.

The division compartment doors on the starboard side were open and the water came in by the tons. A man by my side pointed to a port dog as the ship turned over and we managed by some super-human strength to hold fast. Seemed as if the compartment was filled with water in 10 seconds or less. Lights were out and someone had hold of my gas mask strap — finally dragging me under — but I tried hard to keep my head up — all the time trying to find a handhold. Finally grasped a bunk stanchion and held on for dear life.

"The fuel oil fumes and what some determined as gas mixed with powder smoke filled the air

ready foul air. Six inches of breathing space was all that was left between the overhead and water level. The pressure being so great, the water stayed at that level. Thank heaven. After about 15 minutes of this our breathing came short and fast. The feeling of hot pepper filled our lungs and throats.

"The men in the compartment were not the least panicky. In fact, they were more than just mainly. Recognized one of the men's voices — very faintly, of course, as it was awfully hard to hear because of the pressure. Happened to be John Nell at home — what a relief to know that he was alive! So started searching for a possible means of escape. Finally, one of the men shouted that he had found a port undogged. Of course we all tried to make it over to the spot where his voice had come from as I heard John's voice come to me again. He said 'gas' — you know we won't last long in this. So we tried to locate the man with the port. As I hung there talking I imagined I could see him, his hair combed smoothly and very tidy looking. Then spoke to an imaginary fellow to put out his cigarette. What a thought, water and oil everywhere how could anyone have lighted a single thing? What I saw was the phosphorus on a stanchion. Was getting all jumbled up inside; I guess it was affecting us all.

"As they all had gathered about the port everyone was arguing what would be found on the other side of the port! Another compartment the same as this? Decided that it was just that senseless to think of such things but at that time we could only think of the worst. All decided that the man that had found the port could go out first if he chose to do so. He said no, that the next compartment would be the same as this.

"No one else wanted to try, so I told John I sure wasn't about to smother to death and I'd rather drown than stay down there. So I dove down about five feet, opened the port and slid out — without any effort at all.

"As I hit the water outside the compartment my lungs seemed as if to burst, my eyes cracked, my ears popped — so as I ascended I was real careful not to go up too fast, for fear I would bump my head on the overhead or possibly a blister.

"As my last ounce of strength ebbed my lungs felt like two pieces of sandpaper rubbing together. I blew outward — held my breath as long as possible — then I inhaled deeply. What next, I thought.

"The sun!!
"So excited was I that nearly
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drowned looking about me.

"As I looked at the ship, bottom side up, my heart nearly stopped. Commander J. L. Kewarthy, Jr., executive officer at that time, was standing on her side — aiding in the rescue of wounded and drowning. Amid all the gunfire and machine gunning, I was hauled aboard the motor launch — then set out for the NAS landing. Upon arriving my clothes were changed and then proceeded to try to get a little of the crust off me. Thought I had a mouthful of oil — but it was blood. Hadn't until then been frightened but when I saw that I got the chills and everything.

"As we left the NAS landing I was hanging on to the side of a pickup truck — fair men in all in the sky a movement of planes in formation just breaking into a dive. Under the car went four of us — where we laid, expecting about any minute a machine gunning.

"Proceeding to the air base dispensary we were all treated for this and that. Was waiting turn in line when if by some miracle of God everyone moved inside. I turned to say something and as I did a bomb came directly into the small square where seconds before stood at least a half hundred people. Didn't harm a soul, just peeled the cement back.

"I walked across the street to the mess hall where some of the burned and injured persons were lying about. As I glanced about my pains were nearly forgotten. Small stores were issued all hands. Chow coffee, cigarettes, fruit and everything, was given to the men, most of which were either too mad to eat or in no condition to."

"That evening we were taken to the bachelor officers quarters for supper, such as it was, then to the naval ammunition depot in the dead of night in a motor launch. Subs lay in the harbor and mines were about. Glad we were told this later. They'd had a heck of a time keeping me down in those conditions. Thank God, anyway John and I were spared and together.

"Early morning a second attack occurred. All hands were aroused from their bunks. What a deal. Outside the shrapnel was falling about by the buckets. No sleep Monday.

"Monday we had a new episode. A cane fire was set by some native Jap, suspectedly. Continued for hours. After all hands had turned to it was extinguished.

"December 16 — Transferred to the USS Louisville where was at work in the flag office. Then went to the commander of Destroyer Flotilla One where I was assigned to work with the fleet casualty office. Now working in the personnel office receiving station PHTH."